

House Appropriations Subcommittee on Agriculture, Rural Development & FDA

Budget Hearing- US Forest Service

April 16, 2026

Witness: Tom Schultz, Chief, U.S. Forest Service

Highlights:

The hearing examined the Administration's FY 2027 U.S. Forest Service budget, focusing on wildfire preparedness, proposed agency reorganization, and a shift toward active forest management amid fiscal constraints. Members raised questions about the impacts of proposed funding reductions and structural changes on research capacity, state partnerships, and long-term forest health while acknowledging growing wildfire risks nationwide.

Key Points:

- FY 2027 Budget Overview
 - The Administration's FY27 request emphasizes:
 - Active forest management (timber, thinning, grazing, reforestation)
 - Fiscal discipline following a reported ~\$750 million budget shortfall
 - Reduction or elimination of several long standing programs, including Forest & Rangeland Research and most State & Private Forestry assistance
 - Chief Schultz argued that forest mortality from wildfire, insects, and disease now exceeds growth, making active management "not optional."
- Wildfire Management & Proposed Transfer to DOI
 - The budget again proposes transferring all federal wildfire suppression functions from USDA/USFS to the Department of the Interior, creating a unified federal wildland fire service.
 - Congress previously rejected this proposal (FY26).
 - Members raised concerns about lack of detail and unclear operational impacts.
 - USFS and DOI are commissioning an independent feasibility study, expected to conclude Fall 2026.
 - Subcommittee leadership signaled strong reluctance to approve consolidation before study completion.
- Fire Preparedness for 2026 Season
 - Schultz warned of a potentially severe fire season, citing exceptionally low Western snowpack and widespread drought. USFS actions include:
 - 9,390 firefighters hired to date (ahead of prior years)
 - Target of 11,300 total firefighters
 - Continued emphasis on:

- Aggressive initial attack
 - Firefighter safety
 - Prescribed fire and mechanical thinning
 - Reorganization changes will not affect field operations during fire season
- Forest Service Reorganization
 - The Forest Service is pursuing a major restructuring to:
 - Relocate headquarters from Washington, DC to Salt Lake City
 - Eliminate the current regional office model
 - Shift to a state based leadership structure
 - Reduce layers of management and internal directives
 - Rationale:
 - Over 3,600 internal directives cited as impeding field decision making
 - Goal is to push authority closer to on the ground staff
 - Projected impacts:
 - Approx. 500 employees (≈1.5% of workforce) may need to relocate
 - 3 of 9 regional offices slated for closure
 - No formal reduction in force announced, though members raised concerns about staff attrition
 - Collective bargaining with unions is ongoing; plans are not final
- Research & State/Private Forestry Cuts (Primary Controversy)
 - Forest & Rangeland Research
 - Budget zeros out research funding, placing approximately 800 scientific positions at risk
 - Up to 57 research facilities identified for potential closure
 - Some programs retained (e.g., Forest Inventory & Analysis, Fire Sciences Lab)
 - Chief distinguished between the reorganization (no immediate scientist layoffs claimed) and the budget (research funding eliminated), a distinction heavily criticized by members
 - State, Private & Tribal Forestry Programs
 - State Fire Assistance, Volunteer Fire Assistance, Forest Stewardship, and Urban Forestry proposed for elimination
 - Schultz argued states now have sufficient capacity to assume greater responsibility
 - Multiple members strongly disagreed, warning states and Tribes lack fiscal capacity, especially for wildfire preparedness
- Key Congressional Concerns
 - Insufficient detail for congressional oversight

- Risk of losing experienced staff (citing prior USDA relocations)
- Erosion of federal responsibility for research, wildfire prevention, and state partnerships
- Impacts on water quality, forest health monitoring, and rural/Tribal communities